

# Minors must have parent present for most piercings

## HEALTH VS. SELF-EXPRESSION: COUNTY REGULATES INDUSTRY

By Julie Sevens Lyons  
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If you're under 18, getting your upper ears pierced at the mall is now illegal in Santa Clara County -- unless you bring mom or dad along.

The same is true if you want to put a hole in your navel, nose, eyebrow or tongue.

And even with a parent cheering you on, you can't legally get your private parts pierced.

Today the county starts cracking down on tattoo parlors and piercing places that cater to underage clients. If caught violating the law, owners face fines of up to \$500 per violation, or even jail time.

The regulations, developed in response to a growing public health concern, are some of the most stringent in the state, which already bans tattoos for minors. They call for spot inspections of mall piercing kiosks and stricter hygiene standards for tattoo parlors.

San Mateo and San Francisco counties also have piercing and tattooing guidelines, but Santa Clara County is believed to be the first in the state to ban nipple and genital piercings for teens.

Parents may be celebrating the milestone, but many kids aren't.

"I don't think that's right," said Tatiana Aguilar, 16, of San Jose, who has her nose and ears pierced. "If you're a teenager and you have your own mind to think, you should be able to get whatever you want pierced."

Teens would not be prosecuted under the new regulations -- although, of course, they may face the wrath of parents for coming home with a "Bleep authority" tattoo or a nipple ring.

"Maybe we'll get some bad players that would hurt some kid or adult out of the county," said Ann Clarkson, an environmental health specialist for the county who was instrumental in drafting the new rules.

While teens may gripe that the new policies make it more difficult for them to express themselves, health experts believe it will also prevent disease or infections.

The piercing and body art industry has been largely unregulated. Many states don't require even minimal training or certification for those who enter the business, or proper sanitation and disinfection techniques for the tools they use.

As a result, infections are relatively commonplace.

Two Monterey County teens developed staph infections last year from a freelance tattoo artist who admitted working on more than a dozen underage teens. And last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 44 people in three states acquired skin infections from their tattoos in 2004 and 2005. These were particularly virulent bacterial infections that didn't respond to basic antibiotics.

“There is a serious health risk here,” said Bil Brierley, a San Jose piercer who approached the county two years ago and requested they crack down on his profession. “It's our attempt to address that, so that the public is safe and they feel safe when they walk into a facility like mine.”

He added, “We're taking an industry that could have literally operated in the garage, in the back yard, in the flea market, and made it so the only way they can practice is to be hygienic.”

Some question whether the new regulations will work. After all, you can find a place where regulations aren't as strict by crossing the county line.

“A lot of kids will find a way to do it without a parent with them,” said Brittany Prince, 17, of Fremont. Prince said she had a parent come along for her each of seven ear piercings and her nose stud. But it's unrealistic to think that all high school students would be willing to tote a parent along to a piercing parlor, she said.

Teenagers have been piercing each other with needles and ice cubes “as long as little girls have been having slumber parties. There's nothing to prevent it, actually,” said Samantha Tweeten, a San Diego epidemiologist who published a study in 1998 on the risks of body piercing.

Tweeten, an HIV/AIDS epidemiologist who has nine piercings herself -- including one in her navel that became infected -- said she supports Santa Clara County's legislation. She points to instances where hepatitis has been spread through dirty equipment.

“It's none of my business if people get pierced,” she said, “but it *is* my business they get it in a safe fashion.”

Still, she questioned why the local ordinance singles out upper ear, nipple and genital piercings in minors while allowing them to get navels, tongues, eyebrows and earlobes pierced.

“That smacks of moralistic judgment to me,” said Tweeten. If the focus is on protecting teens from the risks associated with putting holes in their skin, “you're going to stop piercing,” she said. “You're not going to say ‘It's OK to do it here, it's OK to do it there -- but no nipples.’”

Tongue piercings, for example, which are still allowed with parental permission, are known to cause swelling and infections, and have been associated with broken teeth and irritated gums. Naval piercings are also prone to infection.

John Pecoraro, owner of Pierced Out in San Jose, said he thinks it is good that the county has banned piercing of the genitals and nipples in people who are still so young.

“Your body parts are not fully developed at 18. That can cause complications, so we don't do it,” he said. Plus, to be honest, “You're talking about having an adult touch a minor's private areas, which in the state of California is usually statutory rape.”

Myrna Armstrong, a professor of nursing at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in Lubbock, said she is particularly pleased with the county's new regulations on tattooing.

Armstrong, who has researched the tattoo industry, estimates that only about one in four tattoo studios are reputable. Manicurists have undergone more training than they have, she said -- and they don't poke people with needles and draw blood.